

ON VAN EYCK, ALLEGORIUS, AND RIBERA

Just passing on the particular without giving us any further clue, Panofsky says that Flemish painters from Low Countries had certainly known something about Nicholas of Cusa¹. I perceive in Van Eyck's most famous painting—that which is at the cathedral's retable of Ghent—a serene, a very satisfied God, a God in whom every contrariety—either theoretical or practical one—has been calmly solved: "It is perfection to such an extent that in it everything imperfect is most perfect, just as an infinite line is an infinite sphere, and in this sphere curvature is straightness."² But taking into account the whole Universe presented in the Ghent's retable, hardly one can find Nicholas' of Cusa *Harmonious Universe*. By observing the musicians, we can find but mourn, and among former Christians or martyrs, even more brutal pain: one of them showing his severed tongue. Eyck's God is certainly a mind-absented one, or which is the same: one who



¹ *Early Netherlandish Painting*, pages 2-3: "Bartolomeo Fazio, a humanist from Genoa...comes very close to the great secret of Eckyian painting: the simultaneous realization, and, in a sense, reconciliation, of the 'two infinities,' the infinitesimally small and the infinitely large." E. Panofsky. Cambridge University Press, 1953. Suggestively, Nicolaus' Cusanus *De Docta Ignorantia* I, 4:XII says: "For maximum quantity is maximum large; and minimum quantity is maximally small. Therefore, if you free maximum and minimum form quantity—by mentally removing large and small— you will see clearly that maximum and minimum coincide." *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, Volume One, page 9 ff.. The Arthur J. Banning Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2001.

² *Ibid*, page 39.



ignores human misfortune. Going a big deal further with this particular *apathetic God*, things get even more radical with Allegorius of Sevastopol: his *Unmoved Mover* is no more than an extreme consequence of Eyck's God; a mere piece of masonry which echoes Piranesi's influence, a totally inhuman machinery, and lacking of a warming touch with Adam and Eve. *The First Mover* of the Universe –to which so fond are Catholics and Protestants as well— is no more than a well crafted piece of cosmological engineering, with no regards to the four gospels' God-Father. With Allegorius' God, *apathy* gets its highest expression.



Quite the contrary, I find Ribera's concept of God in accordance with the simplest message from the New Testament: *the God Father*. Its expression save me from any large comment: his is a suffering God, a God who was not able to reconcile contraries, a God whose *contracted maximum* called *Jesus* –just for using Cusanus' expressions— has been embarrassed and crucified. Rather than a harmonious universe, Ribera presents us a Spaniard God feeling the tragic sentiment of life.



